

Disclosure of White House Interference on 9/11 Air Quality Prompts Nadler Call for Congressional Hearings

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Congressman Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) made the following statement after a recent report that the White House instructed EPA officials to downplay air quality concerns in New York City after the terrorist attacks of September 11:

"The Bush White House's so-called "credibility gap" widened further this week, as the New York Times reported that an internal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) watchdog found that the White House instructed the EPA to downplay post-9/11 air quality and public health concerns in New York City. Now Mr. Bush's veracity problem is no longer confined to the arena of international affairs. It appears that he has similar trouble telling the truth about matters here at home.

"A leaked section of a report by the EPA's Inspector General's (IG) Office confirms what I have documented and many New Yorkers have known since September 2001: the EPA misled us when it gave assurances about air quality after the collapse of the World Trade Center (WTC) towers. We knew that when then-EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman announced to New Yorkers, shortly after the attacks, that the "air is safe to breathe" and that we "need not be concerned about environmental issues as [we] return to [our] homes and workplaces"; that she didn't have the information to support those assurances or make recommendations. But the report also documents how the White House itself, through its Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), actually manipulated the statements being released by the EPA so as to soft-peddle health concerns. The report alleges that it did this because of "competing considerations, such as national security and the desire to reopen Wall Street." In doing so, the White House politicized critical environmental and public health information, thereby endangering the health and lives of New York City residents.

"Because of these misleading statements, and because the EPA bucked its legal responsibility and left the problem to the City, there has been inadequate hazardous materials testing and remediation inside most buildings affected by the disaster - putting the public health at continued risk. This is true even though the EPA reversed course in May of 2002 and initiated an extremely limited and flawed voluntary clean-up program for lower Manhattan residences.

"The leaked IG's report now begins to tell us a story of how the Administration actually mislead the public. Though utterly outrageous, the fact that the White House instructed the EPA to doctor press releases and downplay health perils should really come as no surprise to anyone who has watched this CEQ function. This is the same Bush White House that forced the EPA to withdraw the section on climate change from its report on the environment issued in June. It is interesting that the report was leaked by individuals within the EPA who believe the IG paints too harsh a picture. It appears to me that EPA officials don't want to take the heat for the White House's egregious deeds. I'd imagine that they don't want the agency to face a problem with trustworthiness when it comes to their mission of "protecting human health and the environment."

"While the IG's report provides us with a first glimpse of how the federal government mishandled environmental issues in the 9/11 aftermath, New York City residents deserve more. First, we must see the entire IG's report, because there are many unanswered scientific and process questions. Second, in its oversight role, Congress must demand to know why the White House intervened in a way that put the public health at risk, and if in so doing, violated federal law and procedures. But most importantly, the EPA must now take immediate action to systematically test and remediate all buildings affected by the WTC disaster, using properly trained personnel and the best-available equipment and methods tied to genuine, established health-based standards. Indeed, last week's article in the Journal of the American Medical Association linking WTC environmental effects to low birth-weight babies should be clear enough evidence that there are more adverse public health impacts to come if inadequate government action continues.

"President Bush and his advisors should be highly concerned as the public further questions his credibility, and again sees that the White House has improperly intervened and politicized life and death policy decisions for its own

"considerations." In the State of the Union, the White House substituted its "wisdom" for that of the CIA and State Department when it kept an unsubstantiated war justification in a major speech. In this instance, the White House imperiled the public health by deciding to provide false reassurances without supporting data. As Mr. Bush goes out this month to campaign on his domestic environmental record, he should realize that the American electorate knows that misleading the public is a hard habit to break."

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